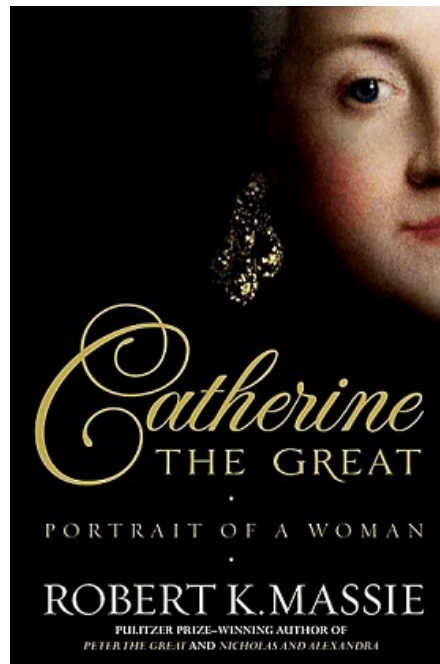




Catherine the Great: Portrait of a Woman

Robert K. Massie

Download now

Read Online ➞

Catherine the Great: Portrait of a Woman

Robert K. Massie

Catherine the Great: Portrait of a Woman Robert K. Massie

23 hours, 52 minutes

Pulitzer Prize winner Massie offers the tale of a princess who went to Russia at 14 and became one of the most powerful women in history. Born into minor German nobility, she transformed herself into an empress by sheer determination. Possessing a brilliant, curious mind, she devoured the works of Enlightenment philosophers, and reaching the throne, tried using their principles to rule the vast, backward empire. She knew or corresponded with notable figures of her time: Voltaire, Diderot, Frederick the Great, Maria Theresa of Austria, Marie Antoinette & John Paul Jones. Wanting to be the “benevolent despot” Montesquieu idealized, she contended with the deeply ingrained realities of Russian life, including serfdom. She persevered, and for 34 years the government, foreign policy, cultural development and welfare of the Russian people were in her hands. She dealt with domestic rebellion, wars & the tides of political change and violence inspired by the French Revolution. Her reputation depended on the perspective of the speaker. She was praised by Voltaire as like the classical philosophers. She was condemned by enemies, mostly foreign, as “the Messalina of the north.” Her family, friends, ministers, generals, lovers and enemies are vividly described. These included her ambitious, scheming mother; her weak, bullying husband, Peter (who left her sexually untouched for nine years after their marriage); her unhappy son & heir, Paul; her beloved grandchildren; and her favorites—the young men from whom she sought companionship and the recapture of youth as well as sex. Here, too, is Gregory Potemkin, her most significant lover & possible husband, with whom she shared a correspondence of love & separation, followed by 17 years of unparalleled mutual achievement. All the qualities that Massie brought to Nicholas & Alexandra and Peter the Great are present: historical accuracy, deep understanding, felicity of style, mastery of detail, ability to shatter myth & a genius for finding and expressing a human drama.

Catherine the Great: Portrait of a Woman Details

Date : Published November 8th 2011 by Random House, Inc. (NY) (first published 2011)

ISBN : 9780679456728

Author : Robert K. Massie

Format : Hardcover 625 pages

Genre : History, Biography, Nonfiction, Cultural, Russia, Historical

 [Download Catherine the Great: Portrait of a Woman ...pdf](#)

 [Read Online Catherine the Great: Portrait of a Woman ...pdf](#)

Download and Read Free Online Catherine the Great: Portrait of a Woman Robert K. Massie

From Reader Review Catherine the Great: Portrait of a Woman for online ebook

Bou says

Robert K. Massie does a convincing effort to tell us Catherine the great, or the tale of how a small German princess became one of the greatest monarch during the Enlightenment era.

Born to a low noble German family, Catherine's life got turned upside down when she was betrothed to Paul I, the adopted son of Empress Elizabeth of Russia. However, the betrothal and subsequent marriage was not a happy one, and due to the eccentric behaviour of Paul I she was quickly able to seize the throne in 1762.

Where Peter the Great was to make Russia one of the great European powers, Catherine managed to introduce the Enlightenment ideals, where she emphasized human intelligence as power, and set out to create a culture based on reading, pondering and criticism.

She named herself an "enlightened autocrat" and is known for spreading Western ideas to Russia. However, although on the surface being considered as benevolent, in many cases she upheld noble privilege, increased serfdom and continued autocratic rule.

It is this contradiction, that Massie delivers in great deal in his book.

Rebecca Huston says

This one was clearly a win for me as a biography of Catherine the Great. Massie's writing is clear, brisk and kept the story moving throughout. What I really enjoyed was how he took the time and trouble to show how Catherine carried forward the reforms begun by Peter the Great, and was a monarch who overcame a great deal of adversity to overcome the obstacles of not being Russian, being a woman, and a usurper to boot -- most biographies focus on her time before becoming empress and/or her lovers -- while Massie does look closely at several of them, he also wisely discards the more wild rumours and looks at what Catherine actually *did*. While I did receive an ARC of this, I still intend to buy a copy of the finished edition. This one gets five stars from me, and a hearty recommendation for anyone interested in Tsarist history.

For the longer review, please go here:
<http://www.mylot.com/post/2913151/rev...>

Jess says

Whew. What a densely loaded book about a fascinating woman. If you have an interest in Catherine the Great, this is most definitely a biography to add to your repertoire. When the audiobook has 19 "chapters" which are just over an hour in length... you know you are getting your book's worth of material. My interest is still piqued in Russian history and this woman.

I also appreciated the time devoted to her predecessor Elizabeth, her sort of technically uncoronated predecessor Peter, as well as the Enlightenment philosophers of the time period. The time spent explaining

the concept of "serfs", how Russians considered wealth, and the eventual emancipation of the serfs was fascinating. Very closely coinciding with our own Emancipation Proclamation.

I am still fairly ignorant to Russian history but I know this book combated that ignorance. Highly recommend.

Alice Poon says

This engaging and well-researched historical tome about one of Russia's greatest rulers merits 4 full stars. Apart from painting a memorable and respectable portrait of the dramatic life of Catherine the Great, the book also accounts succinctly for the labyrinth of European/Eurasian politics at play in the 18th century, and depicts Russia's participation in the Seven Years' War, its carving up of Poland, its two major Wars with Turkey and its putting down the Pugachev Rebellion.

As a child German princess, Catherine II was inspired by her Huguenot Frenchwoman tutor to develop a "permanent love of the French language, with all its possibilities for logic, subtlety, wit and liveliness in writing and conversation". As a Russian grand duchess and later Empress, she came under the influence of great French philosophers and writers like Bayle, Voltaire, Diderot and Montesquieu, and became the life-long friend of Friedrich Melchior Grimm. Hence her guiding rules for governance were fundamentally based on Enlightenment principles, although she always kept up the appearance of being a devout Orthodox Christian since her conversion from Lutheranism at the time of her marriage to Peter III at the age of fifteen.

Despite her sincere attempt to end centuries-old serfdom in Russia, stiff opposition from the deeply entrenched landed nobility, especially those who had a hand in putting her on the throne, meant that her hands were tied. But her summoning the Legislative Commission in 1767 to debate on social issues raised in her carefully crafted "Nakaz" (a political treatise) showed that she was truly willing to listen to opinions of her subjects about social reforms.

Her personal life was marked by frustration and misery in the first nine years of her marriage. Then after the death of Empress Elizabeth, a twist of fate catapulted her to the zenithal position. Delight, love and career pursuits, success and material opulence decorated her mid-life. After the death of the love of her life, her trusted partner and best friend – Gregory Potemkin – in 1791, she never quite recovered from her grief.

It is interesting to note that the term "Potemkin village", with its sarcastic undertone which is meant to mock something that's sham or fraudulent, is actually unjustly attributed to Gregory Potemkin and ungrounded in truth in its common usage. As Massie points out, when Potemkin showed Catherine his great achievements in the form of newly built ports, villages and naval bases in the Crimean peninsula, there were other eyewitnesses – the ambassadors from England and France – who were just as amazed as Catherine on seeing the spectacular new buildings and infrastructure, which couldn't have been cardboard displays.

Sam says

This book is hard to place on a scale. At times, it's a 5 and other times it's a 2 or even a 1. After some debating in my head I'm going to give it a 3.5, but it's not enough to round it up to a 4.

This book started off as a 5 and I loved it. The story of Catherine (then Sophia) growing up, being picked as the bride for the heir to the Russian Empire, and her years spent in Russia was great. Massie interspaced entries from her own memoirs into these years and it really added a great personal flavor to the history. Granted I didn't know that story going into this book but it's a very interesting look at a girl getting out from under her family and turning into a strong woman.

Then Catherine becomes Empress and the book takes a huge nose-dive. Just when I thought it was going to really get interesting. Instead of continuing the solid chronological narrative, the author suddenly decides to tackle broad topics related to Catherine's reign – her legal code book, her various lovers, Poland, philosophy, art etc. All important things to her rule but it's a very jarring switch. Plus he bounces around in the timeline until I have no real sense of when these things are happening. The crème de la crème occurs when suddenly there's a chapter on the French revolution and the death penalty.

The author eventually jumps back towards a chronological narrative but he never recovers the strength of the beginning. There's still a lot of year jumping so that it feels like you learn about something only to go back in time and build the years up to it. Not the smoothest read for sure and while I was more interesting in the historical events, I never felt like I got a solid look at Catherine's full reign as Empress.

Before you know it, Catherine is an old woman. Like I really had a holy shit moment of why is her health failing suddenly?! What do you mean she's in her 60s and her grandson is like 17 and people think she wants him to be heir?! HE WAS JUST BORN?! Then she's gone and that's the book. I really could have used a legacy chapter here or even a little bit of what happened next to the family.

Honestly I think Massie tried to tackle too much in one book. It's understandable given her amazing life and the interesting journey she took to the Russian throne. It was definitely a 5 star read for me. I wish he would have sorted out her life as Empress and folded broad issue topics into the narrative as they occurred as a second book. I can recommend the first part of this book. If you want to learn about Catherine pre-Empress, it is definitely an intriguing story. Just don't expect to be too excited about her life as Empress.

Ashley *Hufflepuff Kitten* says

Historical Fictionistas Group Read starting 1Feb15!

Started reading this in February, got roughly 30 pages in and put it down... Found the audio through my library and I'm SO GLAD I did, otherwise I might never have finished this. Not because it's boring, but because the research is simply EXHAUSTIVE. If you're interested in Russian history, I highly recommend this book. It's my first Massie book but I have two more waiting at home (thankfully shorter than this one). He presents history from all angles-- you get to see Catherine through her own memoirs and the writings of others around her throughout her life. Every page makes clear how much research went into this book, and if this is so well-written I can only imagine how incredible his Pulitzer-winning book on Peter the Great is.

Before this book, the majority of what I knew of Russian history included Nicholas II's family (I've been obsessed with them since I first saw Anastasia as a child), the Bolsheviks, serfdom, and names like Peter the Great, Catherine the Great, and Ivan the Terrible. Just because I knew their names didn't mean I necessarily knew anything about them. Having finished this, I can happily say that I know much more about Catherine's life and reign than I did after my European History class in high school. Again, I remember her name cropping up but I don't recall learning a whole lot aside from the whole serf thing.

It seemed to peter out (haha) toward the end a bit, probably because I have little interest in government and zoned out here and there because I was just ready to be DONE, but overall this was a fascinating book. As mentioned in my updates, I had no idea Catherine was so connected with people like Voltaire and Diderot, nor was I familiar with the circumstances that led to her reign. It was so refreshing to learn as I listened, and reminded me how much I like biographies. Kudos, Mr Massie. Portrait of a Woman, indeed.

Athens says

Maybe this book is very excellent at what it wanted to be, but I wanted it to be something different. I wanted a history book.

- 1) In trying to be accessible, the prose comes off as simplistic at times.
- 2) A quibble is the repetition of statements from only a few chapters prior. Those statements do help set the scene for the current action, but are sometimes overdone and unnecessary if the reader had been paying any attention at all to what was just recently covered.
- 3) At one point in the book towards the back, Massie gets into personal musings about the death penalty that have zero bearing on the topic (in my view), and 4) tries to squash in a wide variety of topics that could better have been covered as we went along through the narrative. In short, the back eighth seems to contain a collection of afterthoughts.
- 5) My final complaint is the amount of text spent upon the emotional trivia of love affairs, the clothing worn, the "rich and famous" approach that pops up throughout the text. In places I think I am reading about the sumptuous gowns worn by the Kardashians and how drunk they all got one night. Massie cheapens his subject a bit too much for my taste in places.

On the upside...

- 1) He did paint a portrait of Catherine with humanity and dimension.
- 2) The portrayal of Potemkin and his achievements was quite interesting, along with the exceptional tour that was put on to view it all.
- 3) Some, though not heavy, coverage was given to the foreign policy issues of the day. I wish badly that this area had been given much more complete treatment.

Overall, I am a bit disappointed that a book by a well-known writer must be written to this mediocre standard. Maybe that says more about us than it does about him.

Grace Tjan says

FROM THE MEMOIRS OF CATHERINE THE GREAT

First things first: that wasn't my *real* name. The Empress Elizabeth, who was Peter the Great's daughter (now, that is a man who truly deserves "the Great" after his name!), changed my name to Ekaterina when she converted me into the Russian Orthodox religion. As for that superfluous title that follows my new name, it was prematurely bestowed on me by the Legislative Commission that I convened to give Russia a more enlightened legal code (more on this later). I brought them together to study laws, and they were busy discussing my virtues instead. Imagine that! I still blush with embarrassment whenever I recall the incident, although I cannot say that I'm thoroughly displeased with it.

My real name is Sophie Friederike Auguste von Anhalt-Zerbst-Dornburg. Yes --- I was a German import. Many Romanov royals, including my future husband Tsar Peter III, are actually *Germans*, specifically Prussians. This caused some awkwardness later when we went to war against Prussia in my reign --- but that was still far in the future. Papa was the ruler of the Anhalt-Zerbst principality. Some people would call him a minor aristocrat, but he was still a prince, *nein*? Mama was formerly a princess of the house of Holstein-Gottorp (yes, that's where those lovely cows come from), whose late brother was affianced to the young Empress Elizabeth. He died of smallpox before the wedding, but Elizabeth never forgot him, and when it was time to look for a spouse for the Tsarevich, she naturally turned toward his family.

I was all of 14 years old when Elizabeth summoned Mama and me to Russia to marry Peter III. I was just a tiny slip of a girl then! The entirety of my trousseau consisted of three old dresses, a dozen chemises, a few pair of stockings and a few handkerchiefs. You see, Mama had spent all of the money that the empress sent for me on her own wardrobe. That's Mama for you. Soon after my wedding, Elizabeth unceremoniously sent her back home for being a meddlesome mother-in-law and a clumsy Prussian secret agent. I never saw her again for the rest of my life.

That's my husband. As you can see, he's not much of a catch, but he's still Peter the Great's only surviving grandson, and that's *who* I married --- the future Tsar of all the Russias. Peter was a sickly man-child who would rather play with his toy soldiers on our marital bed than with me. He was not allowed to play with them during the day, so they were hidden under the bed. As soon as we were both in bed, Madame Krause, our nanny/supervisor, would come in and brought out the toy soldiers. I couldn't even move in the bed --- they were so many of them! Peter played with them until well after midnight, and every time someone knocked at the door to check on us, we had to scramble to hide the toys under the blanket. It was farcical: a newly married couple constantly on guard lest they be caught playing with toys. But the Empress Elizabeth was not amused when, years into our marriage, we had not produced the heir that she was expecting from us.

The fact is that my husband never touched me for the first nine years of our marriage. There was a lot of speculation as to the reason why. He openly told me that he was in love with another woman --- one of my ladies in waiting --- but it seemed that the relationship was similarly unconsummated. Others speculated that he was just simply too physically and mentally immature to father a child. Some of our learned doctors even diagnosed him with *phimosis* (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phimosis>). Sergei Saltykov, the first of my twelve lovers (oh, how handsome he was!), convinced him to have an operation to correct the condition. You see, once Sergei was involved with me, he became anxious of his own safety. What if I got pregnant? But if Peter had been known to be able to consummate our marriage, who could say that Sergei was responsible? It turned out that my paramour was unnecessarily worried: the empress *herself* had instructed her minions to provide me with a more reliable male for the purposes of begetting an heir --- and Sergei was one of those considered! Anyway, I soon fell pregnant, resulting in Paul, the long-awaited Romanov heir.

Many people claimed to see a marked resemblance between my son and my husband, not just in looks, but also in their shared hobby of playing soldier. But whenever I wanted to needle my son, I always said that Sergei Saltykov was his father. We never got on well, Paul and I, perhaps because I rarely saw him during his childhood. The Empress Elizabeth whisked him away right after he was born, smothered him with frustrated maternal love and casted me aside. When my first grandson was born, I contemplated bypassing Paul altogether and make him Tsar Alexander I, but it was not to happen.

After the empress passed way, Peter briefly got to be Tsar, before he was forcibly deposed by the army, who made me empress instead. Peter idolized Frederick II, the Prussian king who was at war with us, and wanted to make peace with him. The patriotic Russian people hated this radical change in foreign policy and casted their lot with me instead. My then boyfriend, Grigory Orlov (that's him below, by the way --- isn't he dashing?), and his brother made sure that Peter was mysteriously dispatched soon after, and I got to gloriously rally the Russian people on horseback wearing the uniform of a colonel of the Preobrazhensky Regiment.

Boyfriend#3

The reign of Catherine II officially begins!

I believed in the strong Russian motherland and added many territories, 520,000 km² in all, to Peter the Great's empire. When he was only able to gain a toehold in the south, I completed his conquest by defeating the ailing Turks (and gaining a warm water port, so crucial for Russia, in the process). The former Ottoman territories around the Black Sea, the Ukraine, and Crimea (which the love of my life, Grigory Potemkin, administered as my Viceroy) became Russian possessions. I also partitioned Poland, after putting my second lover, Stanislaus Poniatowski, on the throne of that country (poor sweetie, he actually *didn't* want to be king, imagine that!).

Boyfriend#2

On the home front, I tried my best to drag Russia into the modern age. Eighteen years of boredom and loneliness as an unhappily married woman gave me the opportunity to read many books. I imbibed the best ideas of the *Aufklärung* through the writings of M. Montesquieu (whose ideas I pillaged for the *Nakaz*, the new legal code that I envisioned for Russia), Mr. John Locke (what is more important than our children's education, especially our girls?) and Signore Beccaria (torture is barbaric!). I corresponded with the best minds in France, including M. Voltaire (he called me "The Star of the North" --- such a sweet man!) and M. Diderot, whose work on his *Encyclopedie* I supported, and whose library I purchased --- on the condition that he got to keep it during his lifetime as I thought that it would be so cruel to separate a scholar from his books. M. Diderot actually visited me in St. Petersburg to express his gratitude, the poor sickly man. Unfortunately, many of these progressive ideas proved to be far too advanced for the country, and I had to reassert my absolute powers as the autocrat of all the Russias to prevent the total collapse of the social order, particularly during the savage Pugachev rebellion. That rough Cossack pretended to be my long dead husband --- what insolence!

The Benevolent Despot in action

Finally, I must say for myself that as a sovereign I wanted nothing other than what was good for my country, and that I had employed all the powers on my disposal to bring happiness, liberty and prosperity for my subjects. I am aware, however, that I have a number of detractors, who do not hesitate to concoct lies and

outright fabrications to sully my good name. They alleged, for example, that the so-called “Potemkin Villages” deceived me during my visit to the Crimea in 1787. My darling Grigory (below --- mwah, mwah!) might have put some fresh paint on some of the settlements that we passed through, but he *did not* construct whole made-up villages for my benefit. And even if he did, do you think that they could have fooled me, and my whole entourage, which included courtiers, foreign diplomats and even Emperor Joseph II?

Boyfriend#5

And as for that unspeakable, much more egregious fabrication--- let us just say that some men were troubled by the fact that there was an accomplished, powerful woman on the throne and would stop at nothing to slander her. Besides, I had had *twelve* handsome young men at my beck and call --- what would I need a horse for?

Carol says

I wish Robert Massie had written this book before my trip to Russia in 2008. One thing I was looking forward to seeing on that trip was Catherine’s Palace and The Amber Room. Of course, I also visited The Hermitage and between these settings, I did get to see some the incredible art collection that Catherine amassed during her reign. Ah, but there is so much more to this woman.

Robert K. Massie certainly delivers on the subtitle of his book: *The Portrait of a Woman* particularly in the opening chapters where he gives us background on her journey from Germany to Russia as Empress Elizabeth seeks a wife for Peter III and an heir to the throne. The politics of country and church, the wars between this country and that, are not always easy for me to follow but Massie’s narrative non-fiction make for a comfortable read. I learned just enough to give me a basic understanding of this time in history.

This was a book group choice and I started the discussion by asking if there was anything that surprised each reader about Catherine, if there was something they didn’t know before reading the book. It seemed a given that most of us had not known of Catherine’s many lovers, but other accomplishments were not as well known; her relationships with the Russian Orthodox Church, her agility as a horsewoman, her keen mind and ability to write, and her understanding of what it took to be a leader. I hadn’t realized that she was the first person in Russia to be inoculated for small pox, insisting that it be she rather than one of her court or subjects. I was greatly impressed by this. Her vision to see medicine move forward by supporting doctors and hospitals, her humanity to unwed mothers, and her devotion to the arts were also high on her list of achievements. We all were amazed that Catherine, German, not in line for the crown, a woman, with the turmoil of the times, managed to rule for over 30 years and as a whole was well liked.

We wondered at how it must have been to leave your country, never see your father again, be refused the right to correspond with your family, have your first child virtually pulled out of your arms, habitat the same bed for nine years with a man (boy) who wouldn’t even touch you, have superior intelligence to your husband, balance all the lovers, have few women friends, and still manage to stay on top. I think if I had it to do over again, I’d read Massie’s Pulitzer Prize winning *Peter the Great* first as I’d like to understand how Peter’s style of running his country meshed with Catherine’s philosophies. A compelling read!

Elizabeth May says

I raved about Robert Massie's biography on last Russian tsar and tsarina, *Nicholas and Alexandra*, and it was one of my favourite reads last year. In it, Massie briefly mentioned that Peter the Great had abolished the law of primogeniture, which required succession of the throne to be male only, starting with the first-born son. As a result, Russia had three empresses in succession: Anna Ioannovna, Elizabeth Petrovna, and Catherine II. The latter two rose to become autocrat through seizing power from weaker rulers (Elizabeth took the throne from Empress Anna, and Catherine took it from her husband Peter III). Catherine the Great's son Paul apparently hated his mother so much that when he inherited the throne after her death, he abolished Peter the Great's law, and once more the Russian throne only went to male heirs. Had the Pauline Laws not been established, Russian history might look a bit different.

After reading Massie's note, I became curious about the relationship between Catherine II and her son Paul, as well as about the Empress herself. I knew very little about Catherine II outwith the nonsense view of history that scorned her for openly taking lovers and depicted her as nothing more than a sexually perverted woman with silly penis furniture, and claimed she died while having sex with a horse. Good grief.

Just like *Nicholas and Alexandra*, Massie's *Portrait of a Woman* is a meticulously researched and sensitively written account of a philosopher Empress, whose wit and intellect far exceeded those among the Russian court. She came to Russia to marry Peter III, an impulsive, childish buffoon (*Dura!*, Peter. *Dura!*) who emotionally neglected her on his best days and publicly humiliated her on his worst. Catherine's early years in Russia are full of isolation and loneliness, and she sought small moments of comfort and intimacy with several lovers, a few of whom fathered her children, and one of whom was instrumental in the eventual coup d'etat against her universally loathed husband.

As Empress, Catherine was forced to realise that all of the Enlightenment philosophies she believed in on paper were impossible to implement in real-life Russia. She constantly tread a fine line with those in her court who believed her a usurper who murdered her husband to seize power. If she implemented too much change, she risked a revolt, and these limitations were a constant source of dissatisfaction. She wrote the *Nakaz*, her lawbook intended to transform Russia into a culture run by Enlightenment principles, only to have that precious work torn apart by religious leaders and nobles who cared only about maintaining the status quo.

Yet despite these limitations, she transformed Russia. She was a great lover of the arts, of modern medicine, and philosophy. Massie also depicted her as a woman who was, ultimately, very lonely, too. She was so devoted to running her beloved adopted country that her own health and happiness always came second. She took lovers in a meagre attempt to bring some happiness to her own personal life -- in those few hours she had to herself during the night. And yet her lovers were never satisfied because Catherine the Great's first and true love was always, until her death, Russia.

Like *Nicholas and Alexandra* I highly recommend this. Perhaps it's less dramatic, but certainly no less interesting.

Mike says

Sophia, daughter of humble Prince Augustus of Anhalt-Zerbst, Prussia, spends an lonely childhood, unloved

by a scheming mother, recommended by Frederick the Great and subsequently summoned to Russia by Empress Elizabeth, married to the heir Peter III (also a German) who would not consummate the marriage for 9 years, produces an heir to the throne (just who is the father?), then relegated to the background, eventually forces her unbalanced husband to abdicate while she assumes the throne of Russia, tries to add on to Peter the Great's work by bringing enlightenment to the backward nation, has 12 different "favorites" and possibly married one (Potemkin), fights wars, adds great swathes of territory to the west and south to the Russian Empire, became one of the great art collectors of the time and was more Russian than many natural born Russians. Whew, that's the story. Basically she ruled like a girl...a very accomplished, brilliant and amazing one. I'm happy to give this one **5 Stars**.

In most cases, I don't give 2 cents for any "royal" or "noble", an accident of birth that grates on my "murican" sense that all are created equal with equal opportunity to rise. But sometimes a royal stands out and Catherine stands atop a small group of notable nobles. This book gives a detailed account of her life before Russia and after she is brought to St Petersburg. My one complaint is that the book is so intensely focused on Catherine and the Russian court. You do not get the European big picture with Frederick the Great and the Seven Years War, Maria Theresa of Austria and all the major events. After Catherine takes the throne, you get a better picture of her internal and external struggles.

Catherine started out as quite the enlightened monarch but later, especially after the Pugachev Revolt, she pulls back to harsher autocratic rule. Yet she resists cruelty when other of her station have no problem with harsh treatment or torture. Her relationship with men in her life forms a major thread throughout. She was always looking for love and also for a companion who could be her equal intellectually. Potemkin seems to be the only one to meet that need...and yet they can't live together. Mainly because of his being a jerk. Yet he is a fascinating character and Catherine relies on him heavily.

Overall, a fascinating look at a towering figure. The book moves along quickly and you won't be bored if you have any interest in Russian history. Also pertinent to today as you will see how important the Ukraine is to the Russian story. Much of the Ukraine and former Poland becomes Russian in her reign. I would also recommend you read these books about the same period to get a better feel for the wider world Catherine the Great faced:

The Great Upheaval: America and the Birth of the Modern World, 1788-1800
Frederick the Great: The Magnificent Enigma

Madeline says

"She sat on the throne of Peter the Great and ruled an empire, the largest on earth. Her signature, inscribed on a decree, was law and, if she chose, could mean life or death for any one of her twenty million subjects. She was intelligent, well-read, and a shrewd judge of character. During the coup, she had shown determination and courage; once on the throne, she displayed an open mind, willingness to forgive, and a political morality founded on rationality and practical efficiency. She softened imperial presence with a sense of humor and a quick tongue; indeed, with Catherine more than any other monarch of her day, there was always a wide latitude for humor. There was also a line not to be crossed, even by close friends."

I knew almost nothing about Catherine the Great before reading this book. Now that I've finished it, all I say is *damn*, this lady was impressive.

It would have been easy for this book to be a never-ending litany of reasons Catherine's life sucked, but even as Massie details all the tragic aspects of Catherine's life, we never get the sense that we should feel too sad, because her personal strength and character shine through clearly, no matter what hell she happens to be going through at the time. And she went through a lot of shit in her lifetime. Catherine was fourteen when she was brought to Russia to marry the nephew of the Empress Elizabeth, who was unmarried and, despite numerous affairs throughout her reign, didn't have a child of her own to be her heir. So she brought Peter of Holstein to Russia at the age of fourteen to make him her heir instead, and Catherine was shipped over (that's the most accurate way to describe it) in a hurry so they could get married and Elizabeth could officially make Peter her successor. Due mostly to the fact that he'd been uprooted from his home and controlled by sadistic tutors for most of his life, Peter was an unpleasant little shit, and he and Catherine disliked each other. It didn't help either that they didn't have sex for nine years after their marriage (shades of Marie Antoinette), or that Elizabeth was intensely protective of Peter and had Catherine spied on every waking minute, even going so far as to dismiss any servants that Catherine got too friendly with. When Catherine finally had her first child (the father was almost certainly *not* her husband), Elizabeth had the child taken to her own rooms the second it was born. Catherine didn't see her newborn son for an entire week after giving birth to him, and after that she was barely allowed to see him.

So it's understandable that as soon as Elizabeth died and Peter got the throne, Catherine put up with that for about five minutes, and then it was *coup d'etat* o'clock. (or, more accurately, her friends in the military were like, "Hey Catherine, if you feel like overthrowing your lame husband we'll totally back you up" and she was like, "Might as well. Fetch my Usurping Gown.")

Once Catherine becomes empress, everything gets awesome. Massie's book may portray her in an overly-glowing light, but as far as I can tell, Catherine was an ideal ruler. She worked from six am to ten pm, often went days without sleeping or eating, and genuinely wanted the best for her people. She spent months organizing and revising a codex of laws, expanded the empire, improved hospitals and medical practices in the country, and tried to abolish serfdom (all while maintaining affairs with a succession of handsome and charming men, all of whom were in their mid-twenties even when Catherine was in her fifties. Get it, girl). She made permanent improvements to Russia and its people, and it's easy to forget that she technically stole her throne, and wasn't even born Russian. She was a complex, utterly-competent woman who managed to take a terrible situation and make it *awesome*, and then become one of the greatest women in history.

Comparisons to Elizabeth I are inevitable, and thankfully Massie avoids them almost entirely. This book could have easily dissolved into "here's why Catherine was similar to Elizabeth and other famous female rulers, and here's why they were different, etc", and I was very glad that Massie didn't take the book in that direction. Other historical figures come and go here (such as Louis XVI, Voltaire, and even the founder of the US Navy John Paul Jones), but, minus one over-long detour into the French Revolution, Catherine always remains the center of the book's focus. As she should be. She's certainly earned it.

Tatiana says

Like probably every woman of note in history, open about and unashamed of her sexuality, Catherine the Great is primarily remembered as a power- and man-hungry, salacious, perverted woman. Try googling her name and see how high on the list of the results is the ever-pressing question - *Did she really sleep with a horse?* Does anyone care about her accomplishments in politics, art and science? Not really. But her sexual exploits? Oh, YES!

That's why I appreciate Robert K. Massie's Catherine the Great: Portrait of a Woman so much. It is an honest, frank, compassionate account of this superbly intelligent and deeply dedicated to her adoptive

country woman's life.

As expected from a biography of a monarch, this work is pretty heavy on historical details. I won't lie, I skimmed over a good quarter of the book, not desiring to read much about domestic and foreign policies, wars, legislation and reforms.

Thankfully, the details of Catherine's personal life had me glued to the pages of this hefty work. She was brought to Russia at the age of 14, married to a man unable to rid her of her virginity for years (just like Marie Antoinette) and thus encouraged to take a lover and get pregnant by him to finally produce an heir to the Russian throne (which made me think - how many kings, emperors and princes who were assumed to belong to various royal dynasties had actual blood/DNA claim to them? not many methinks), deposed her own husband and usurped the power. And, of course, all those lovers - oh my, 12 in total throughout her life, by Massie's count. Ironically, her husband was not one of the 12.

It is easy to sensationalize these facts of Catherine's life and use them to condemn her. But the reality is, most of what she did was motivated by Catherine's desire to serve Russia, be that by producing a very necessary heir when her husband was unable to do so due to psychological or physical issues, or by removing the same incapable husband from the throne. As for the lovers, as a woman of high intellect and high power, Catherine was never able to find a man emotionally, politically and intellectually equal to her. Thus can be explained her "harem" of young favorites she settled for in the later years of her life, to quench her loneliness mostly.

I finished this biography feeling a lot of respect for Catherine, a progressive, smart, responsible woman. But I felt sad on her behalf too. She might have succeeded as a monarch, but her personal desires of being a mother and having a dedicated life partner were never completely fulfilled.

Dem says

Catherine the Great: Portrait of a Woman by Robert K Massie is the extraordinary story of an obscure young German princess who travelled to Russia at the tender age of fourteen and rose to become one of the most powerful, and captivating women in history.

I had previously read Massie's Nicholas and Alexandra which was wonderful and I was really interested in reading about Catherine the Great.

Massie did extensive research on this book. It is Catherine's detailed and excellent memoirs and letters from which Massie quotes liberally which make it possible for him to write such a wonderful detailed portrait of this Woman and her time in history. Mr. Massie writes elegantly and knows how to get the readers attention and I found myself totally invested in this story and its characters.

I loved reading this book and really learned so much. I spent a lot of time googling places and palaces in Russia that I was totally side-tracked for much of the novel. I did finish the book feeling some compassion for Catherine and her life at court, but I was stunned at the opulence and behaviour of those within the Russian court.

Lovers of history will not be disappointed with this extensively researched and easy to read story that flows from beginning to end.

Laura says

his the biography of Catherine the Great written by Robert K. Massie.

In reality, her birthday's name was Sophie Friederike Auguste von Anhalt-Zerbst-Dornburg.

Her father, Christian August, Prince of Anhalt-Zerbst was a German prince of the House of Ascania. He was a ruler of the Principality of Anhalt-Dornburg.

Her mother, Joanna Elisabeth of Holstein-Gottorp was a princess of the House of Holstein-Gottorp and later the Princess of Anhalt-Zerbst.

By being born in Stettin - a small principality called Anhalt-Zebst, she started out as a German princess.

Since Sophia was not the favorite child of her parents, she saw marriage as a way to escape from her faith.

The Russian came up in Sophia's life one he mother accepted an invitation to St. Petersburg from the Empress Elizabeth who was looking for a suitable wife for her heir, Grand Duke Peter, later called as Petter II.

Catherine was persecuted by Empress Elizabeth for several years since she wanted an heir for the Russian throne quite soon. On the other hand, Catherine's marriage's was not an easy task since her husband suffered from phimosis.

Catherine became Catherine II after a *Coup d'état* and the assassination of her husband at the end of the Seven Years' War.

By consequence, Catherine had several lovers along her life, such as: Sergei Saltykov , the supposed Paul's father; Stanislaus Poniatowski; Grigory Grigoryevich Orlov; Alexander Vasilchikov; Grigory Potemkin and others.

Catherine reign was called Russia's golden age. The *Manifesto on Freedom of the Nobility* freed the Russian nobility from compulsory military service.

Under Voltaire's influence, she was in charge of the Russian Enlightenment: she founded the Hermitage Museum as well as the National Library of Russia.

She lived in the magnificent and beautiful Tsarskoye Selo was the summer residence of the Russian Tsars.

When Catherine died, her successor and son Paul I became the Emperor of Russia between 1796 and 1801.

Catherine was buried at Peter and Paul Cathedral for 34 years.

A movie was made based on Catherine's life: Catherine the Great (1996) with Catherine Zeta-Jones, Paul McGann, Ian Richardson.

Russian Channel One is preparing a lavishly epic historical series CATHERINE THE GREAT with Yulia Snigir playing the legendary Russian tsarina.

Kiwi Begs2Differ \ says

This is a beautiful and very readable biography of one of the most fascinating and influential women in history. The author did not limit his book to Catherine's story nor to her family and the Russian imperial line but included many important figures from the Russian political world and the wider European courts and culture (for example wonderful cameos of Voltaire and Diderot). In this way, Massie successfully provides a 360 degree view of historical period in which Catherine lived and an enjoyable introduction to the main players and events in 18th century European history.

Without losing his focus on Catherine's biography (with perhaps the exception of the description of French revolution in which Catherine declined to directly intervene and where the author indulged in a detailed description the use of the guillotine), Massie describes very well the Russian internal situation and its social structure, her relationship with the Orthodox Church, the caste system and the plight of the serfs were particularly interesting to me.

Highly recommended, this book deserves a full 5 shining stars rating (The book has even maps!)

Memo to self, Massie mentions an interesting story between a Russian aristocrat and his serf celebrity, read The Pearl: A True Tale of Forbidden Love in Catherine the Great's Russia.

Fav. Quotes:

My natural pride made the idea of being miserable intolerable to me. I used to say to myself that happiness and misery depend on ourselves. If you feel unhappy, rise above it and act so that your happiness may be independent of all outside events.

"Monsieur Diderot," she finally said to him, I have listened with the greatest pleasure to all the inspirations of your brilliant mind. But all your grand principles, which I understand very well, would do splendidly in books and very badly in practice. In your plans for reform, you are forgetting the difference between our two positions: you work only on paper which accepts anything, is smooth and flexible and offers no obstacles either to your imagination or your pen, while I, poor empress, work on human skin, which is far more sensitive and touchy.

She was the heavily burdened ruler of a great empire as well as a proud and passionate woman, and she had neither time nor inclination to explain or quibble. She was lonely and she needed a partner, someone with whom to share not power but conversation, laughter, and human warmth. Therein lay one of the problems confronting her: the love of power and the power to attract love were not easy to reconcile.

Matt says

My ongoing exploration of biographies has pushed into yet another realm; women of power. What better way to begin than with a woman who held much power in her time and about whom I know very little? Bring on Catherine the Great of Russia! Robert K. Massie does a sensational job of pulling out a strong and well-rounded story of this most interesting Empress of Russia. She faced hurdles and impediments throughout her life, but always found a way to succeed. While Massie offers the reader numerous parts to the biography, for the purposes of review, the reader can see her upbringing, marriage, and eventual reign as three key areas worthy of discussion below, all of which interconnect to make her the woman remembered by many in history. Massie's effective arguments and thorough research are a treat for the curious reader, even if little is known about this woman before beginning the journey.

Born into a somewhat noble (though by no means powerful) family, Sophia Augusta Fredericka of Anhalt-Zerbst was the first-born and yet shunned by her parents. In an era when male heirs were prized, Sophia was forced to live in the shadow of her younger brother, whose health was precarious at the best of times. Sophia was deemed plain and on the verge of ugly by her mother, something that Massie does not refute strongly in his narrative. As was the norm in the era, she would have to be married off in order to bring some wealth and prominence to her family, as Anhalt-Zerbst was by no means significant. Answering a call from Empress Elizabeth in Russia, Sophia and her mother traveled to court. There, negotiations began to join Sophia to the Grand Duke Peter, himself a teenager. While at court, Sophia tried her best to fit in and studied Russian, as well as commencing a conversion from the Lutheran Church to Orthodoxy, the state religion of Russia and long practiced by the Romanovs. While this would surely dilute her ancestral roots, Sophia was willing to do all she could to earn favour with the Empress and Grand Duke. After her conversion, Sophia became Catherine and her future as Empress Consort began.

Marrying Peter, a man whom she did not love or even particularly care about, was the least of her worries. Catherine's husband had little interest in bringing forth his own heir, as Massie explores, choosing instead to have little Prussian toy soldiers brought to the bed after he and Catherine retired (I cannot refrain from saying that it brings a whole new meaning to 'toys in the bedroom'). Catherine suffered both physical and emotional pains at this flagrant insult to her person, a matrimonial virginity that lasted upwards of nine years. Such rejection took its toll, as well as a number of miscarriages after Peter did consummate the marriage. Both the Grand Duke and Duchess turned elsewhere for their physical needs, with Catherine having at least three men in her life who proved to be significant lovers. Massie goes so far as to stress the depth of these affairs by presenting the reader with the fact that Catherine eventually had children with all three. When Catherine finally bore Peter an heir, they named him Paul and the little one received all the protection due someone in the line of succession. An interesting fact in Russia, the Throne was not passed along by a firm family tree (the tradition of primogeniture). The reigning sovereign was able to choose their successor, as Peter the Great had established when he negated past rules of succession. Elizabeth had chosen her nephew, though she did deeply admire Catherine as well. When Elizabeth died, Peter ascended to the Throne, though he was little known and even less liked by the people. Massie describes Peter III as being belligerent and highly pompous, poor traits for an emperor. He would not engage in conversations and sought to overturn all the major decisions within the state that had been established by Elizabeth. Catherine saw this and knew that she could not remain subservient to a man who treated her so poorly. Massie lays the groundwork for the proverbial last straw when Peter tried to shame his wife at a public banquet. Thereafter, Catherine took

matters into her own hands.

Catherine's formal ascension to the Russian Throne proved interesting and is in line with her hold on power for the length of her reign. Catherine, still stinging from the rebuke in front of so many, organized a coup that overthrew Peter III and saw her take his place. Massie offers a strong narrative for the reader to understand the nuances of this and how Catherine was able to sway the support of the military to her favour before assuming power. Peter III was banished and lost his fight to regain his position, leaving Catherine to begin her lengthy reign. Peter III had only reigned a few months, which made the coup all the more surprising to the outside world. Catherine wasted no time in solidifying her strength both within Russia and on an international scale. Moves to secularise the Church and make priests bureaucrats of the state proved to be a means of lessening the control (and deflating competition) over the population, without banishing religion entirely. Some speculate this was Catherine seeking to give Protestantism a new strength in the country, though this is not entirely supported. She revisited the idea of serfs and the nobility, in an era when slavery remained rampant around the world (especially in the soon to be created United States), though these were not subjugated people of a different culture or ethnicity. On a grander scale, Massie speaks of Catherine's desire to continue ruling as an autocrat, but still have the input of the people who so loved her. Catherine formed a loose advisory board, where representatives could meet and debate various issues of importance to Russia. However, when representatives got caught up in the minutiae, nothing was forthcoming and the collective dissolved with little to show for itself. (It was at this gathering that Catherine was given the title 'The Great', which might indicate that they did something that pleased the Empress!) Surely concerned with her subjects, Massie explores how Catherine handled many health crises within Russia, from smallpox to the plague and many other situations in between. She was by no means wanting to ignore those under her, but did remain isolated so as not to catch what was in the air. On the international front, Catherine returned to her roots and solidified an alliance with Prussia and its monarchy, as Massie seems to insinuate that Anhalt-Zerbst falls under or close to the Prussian lands. Europe was still teetering between a number of alliances, which could turn a single fallen domino into a full-blown war. Russia kept things peaceable and forged ahead with Prussia, turning to small Poland and carving out chunks to strengthen their respective empires. Catherine remained ruler in all but name of Poland, choosing its kings and keeping a close eye on the situation there. While she kept Russian land interests in mind and the military strong, Catherine made sure her people did not forget other Romanov rulers who had helped make Mother Russia strong, erecting monuments and statues of those who came before her. The waning years of Catherine's reign seemed to be a time to remember others and prepare for the end of her own life. It had surely been a full and remarkable reign, which Massie asserts was by no means bland.

As I entered this biography, I could not have told you much about Catherine or what she did for Russia. Massie helps with his attention to detail and significant research on both the region and its ruler. While I remain flummoxed by the number of names, geographic regions, military campaigns, and even historical alliances, Massie uses a detailed narrative to navigate through all this and help me see Catherine's place. That this Empress was a significant figure in Russian history is not lost on me, nor is that she was the last female ruler of the country (after her son, Paul, reinstated primogeniture). Much like some of the other strong females I hope to discover in my biography journey, Catherine leaves an indelible mark on history. Massie is also a biographer to which I will surely return, as his interest in Russia is one that will prove very telling in these trying political times.

Kudos, Mr. Massie for bringing Sophia Augusta Fredericka of Anhalt-Zerbst to life for me. You have a wonderful way with words and prove that European history is full of intricate details that can be compared effectively to the modern political scene. This book solidifies that Catherine surely earned her moniker, while the current autocratic ruler of the country is anything but formidable.

Like/hate the review? An ever-growing collection of others appears at:
<http://pecheyponderings.wordpress.com>

Matt says

Firstly, to answer your most pressing question regarding Catherine the Great, the Empress of Russia from 1762 to 1796: *No, she did not die having sex with a horse.*

Moreover, if you have an abiding interest in the origins of this rumor, Robert K. Massie's *Catherine the Great: Portrait of a Woman* will not satiate your deviant interest (it certainly didn't satisfy mine). Massie refuses to engage the slander – born during her own lifetime – at any level.

Thus, there is not one sentence of horse sex in nearly 600 pages of text.

Of other sexual encounters, though, there are many.

The story of Catherine the Great is filled with sex. There are enough romantic entanglements, sordid liaisons, and passionate affairs to fuel several television seasons on premium cable. There are also dozens of the betrayals, murders, coups, plots and palace secrets that underlie so much of Russia's imperial history. Massie gives life to them all in a book that balances the literal hugeness of Russia – a stage 1/8 the size of Earth – with an intimate, warts-and-all portrayal of her leaders.

Born Sophia Augusta Fredericka, a minor German princess, Catherine eventually traveled to Russia to be the wife of Peter III, the future tsar. Her early years in Russia were extremely difficult. She had a volatile relationship with the reigning Russian monarch, Empress Elizabeth, a relationship that actually looks much better in relation to her husband, Peter III, an immature boy of few gifts who treated Catherine horribly. (Massie supports the theory that Peter's mood, as well as Catherine's and Peter's inability to consummate the marriage, stemmed from Peter's phimosis, a condition marked by a painful tightening of the foreskin).

In 1762, Empress Elizabeth died and Peter ascended the throne, where he performed as poorly as expected. Just six months into his rein, an alienated Imperial Guard revolted and proclaimed Catherine the Empress. Seizing the moment, Catherine had her husband arrested; Peter III was killed by Alexei Orlov just eight days later, while imprisoned. (Massie finds no evidence that Catherine was involved in ordering Peter's death).

Catherine reigned until 1796 in a manner best described as the personification of Montesquieu's "benevolent despot." She liked to compare herself to Peter the Great, and she worked to further modernize/Europeanize Russia. She was a patron of the arts and literature; she believed in the value of education; she paid service to enlightenment values and even carried on a lengthy correspondence with Voltaire. During her 34 year reign, she dealt with wars, rebellions, and the fallout of the French Revolution.

Despite her dalliances with liberalism, though, she was deeply pragmatic. She made some changes to Russia's serf laws, but left serfdom – a pretty way of saying slavery – firmly in place.

Massie tells this sweeping story from the ground, through the eyes of those who lived it. This is first and foremost a story about people. The narrative belies the Tolstoyan view of history as an impersonal force. Instead, it focuses on how history is shaped and shifted by ordinary folks with recognizably human abilities and failings, ambitions and desires.

I am a huge fan of Massie's books, and I have always appreciated this about him. For this same reason, he has disliked by academics and "serious" students of Russia. After all, Massie is a writer, not a researcher. He relies on secondary sources and translations in crafting his books. He does not write scholarly works.

For the most part, I think the criticism is generated by Massie's success. He has amassed an enviable career without ever having to worry about tenure, which certainly must aggravate his critics. But that is not to say that Massie is beyond reproach. Certainly, his lack of facility with primary sources (he uses 4 different translations of Catherine's *Memoirs*) gives me pause.

More importantly, I question Massie's objectivity in dealing with his subjects. He tends to be less a biographer than a booster. This is a failing in all of his books. In *Peter the Great*, Massie delights in telling of Peter capering about Europe incognito, but glosses over the Tsar's order to torture his own son. Similarly, in *Nicholas and Alexandra*, Massie provides an overly-sympathetic portrait of Nicholas as an inherently decent man in over his depth, rather than the anti-Semitic blunderer he actually was.

Here, too, Catherine is given the benefit of every doubt. If Massie is required to make a historical judgment call, you can be certain that it will inure to Catherine's advantage.

These concerns, however, are a bit esoteric, and are overwhelmed by the sheer joy of being in the hands of an absurdly good storyteller. Quite simply, Massie is on a very short list of authors who have that rare gift of giving life to history. You finish this book with a sense not only of what these famous people have done, but what these famous people were like.

Massie's writing style is engaging and graceful, if not elegant. Like Robert Caro, he does not simply focus on his subject, but gives ample time to all the people in his subject's life. As such, *Catherine the Great* treats the reader to fascinating mini-biographies of Johanna, Catherine's scheming, petty, small-minded mother; Empress Elizabeth, the mother-in-law from hell; and Gregory Potemkin, the greatest of all Catherine's lovers, who for many years was the most powerful man in Russia.

The result of Massie's focus on intertwining personalities is a sense of history unfolding as it happens, rather than a discrete event that happened long ago. The larger perspective tends to get lost, but that's okay. If I have to choose between a more formal and rigid survey of Catherine's reign or a detailed recounting of the soap operatic machinations of Catherine's court, I'm choosing the latter.

As I said before, this is a book of sex and violence (but no horse sex or horse violence). It provides all the prurient joys of the trashiest novel, yet comes cloaked in the respectability of a weighty tome by a respected author. I don't know about you, but this is a win-win for me. I'm always on the lookout for a way to satisfy both my lowbrow instincts and my highbrow pretensions. Robert K. Massie's *Catherine the Great* does both.

Chrissie says

I am impressed. Catherine the Great lived from 1729-1796. She was 14 when she first came to Russia, This book covers this entire time period meticulously. I understand how her childhood experiences came to shape her as an adult. I understand her need for love and why she came to have twelve lovers. At the same time she was motivated to seek power. She played a huge role in European history. All of this history is detailed in the book. You meet her as a person and as a leader. Everything one could possibly wish to know about her life is in this book.....except gossip that is unsubstantiated.

Do yourself a favor - read the book! You will learn a lot and enjoy yourself most of the time. I think every time you reread the book you would enjoy it more. The parts most difficult for me were those where my knowledge is lacking.

Through 45%: The NYT Sunday Book Review has an article on the book this week. Here is the link: <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/20/boo...> I must warn you that there are spoilers. One reason alone to read this book is to laugh at crazy Peter. I mean this guy is so juvenile; it is mind boggling. In to his 20s he plays with toy soldiers in his/their bed. He even has real people marching up and down his room. Marching drills, tight uniforms, whips..... Is he real? Unfortunately - yes!

At 35%, the beginning of Part IV: I believe this book will appeal to a different group of people than those who appreciated Nicholas and Alexandra. Catherine the Great is a strong, politically minded person. The book does not focus upon a child with hemophilia. Although you do learn details of Catherine's childhood, and it certainly is essential to know these details to understand who she became as an adult, politics must be the central theme of this book.

Empress Elizabeth is reaching the end of her life. Catherine, who has never been allowed contact with her children, is now considering her next step toward power. It is power that she seeks.

Panin, believing that Peter was unfit to rule and should somehow be removed, wished Paul (Catherine's first child) to be placed on the throne as a boy emperor with Catherine as regent. Catherine pretended to agree with Panin; "I had rather be the mother than the wife of the emperor," she told him. In reality, she had no desire to be subordinated to her own child; her ambition was to occupy the throne herself. (35%)

If you are not interested in a woman seeking power and a place on the political stage, perhaps one should look elsewhere. I am curious to know how many stars I will finally give this book on completion.

I have now read 30% of the book. I am somewhere in Part III. The difficult job of keeping track of who is who is not a problem any more. For me, I get most enjoyment from the book when I am left undisturbed. What I want to mention here is that perhaps you think that the life of the nobility is a piece of cake. Forget that. There is no way you will envy their lives. I do not want to tell you why I say this, because that would be a spoiler. I will give you one example though. Moscow in the 1750s was a city constructed primarily of wooden houses. Sometimes the fancy houses were painted to look like stone. Even the nobility lived in houses of wood. Houses that were cold and infested with vermin. Even the palaces burned. Yes, I think it was in 1753 that the palace where Elizabeth and Peter and Catherine were residing burned. Then they moved to the governess' and governor's house, the house of their arch-enemies, the Choglokovas. Only these two were no longer arch-enemies at this point. The description of their residence, that one would assume would be of high quality, is utterly deplorable! During the fire, what is most interesting to observe is what valuables are "lost/saved" by each. Elizabeth lost the most - thousands and thousands of dresses. Peter, he was embarrassed when a cabinet was hauled out of his room and it opened with liquor and wine bottles spilling out over the mud. And Catherine? Her pile of books by Voltaire and other such authors - they were saved. The articles most important to each says volumes! The author provides direct quotes from existing diaries.

Catherine's birthing experience and the way her child is kept from her are heart wrenching, even considering usual customs of the time. Contact between mother and child was made impossible. Elizabeth had brought Peter and Catherine to Russia. It took years for an heir to be "produced"! After that, Catherine and Peter had little significance to Elizabeth. Their role was finished, as far as Elizabeth was concerned.

I find the book fascinating. Massie's choice of the specific details to include are balanced, descriptive and engaging.

I have begun part two and am at 15%: At first I liked Empress Elizabeth, but now I despise her. Sophia, now called Catherine after her official conversion to the Orthodox faith, has married Grand Duke Peter Ulrich. Neither she nor her husband were told anything about sex. This is rather ironic given all the hullabaloo and planning behind the wedding! Rather essential bits were skipped! What is shocking is Elizabeth's volatile personality. Fortunately, Catherine is intelligent and is learning quickly. She is only seventeen and completely on her own. In a sense she has always been on her own with so one to rely on since her birth. Lives are destroyed on the whims of Empress Elizabeth.

Let me take this opportunity to give you an excerpt concerning Empress Elizabeth:

...Elizabeth, whose concerns and fears were personal: she feared for the security of her person, her throne, and the future of her branch of the dynasty. In her plans, of course, Catherine, Peter, and their future child were of supreme importance. For this reason over the years ahead, Elizabeth's attitudes toward both the young husband and the young wife oscillated dramatically between affection, concern, disappointment, impatience, frustration and rage.

Not only in appearance but also in character, Elizabeth was her parents' child. She was the daughter of Russia's greatest tsar and his peasant wife, who became Empress Catherine I. Elizabeth was tall, like her father, and she resembled him in her energy, ardent temper, and sudden impulsive behavior. Like her mother, she was quickly moved to sympathy and to lavish spontaneous generosity. But her gratitude, like her other qualities, lacked moderation and permanence. (15%)

I appreciate how the author summarizes the descriptive incidents previously depicted. The reader is first part of the whirlwind events and then stands back and looks at what these events say about the individuals.

I do not think I have properly shown you Elizabeth's character/ Listen to this:

To maintain her dazzling preeminence at court, Elizabeth made certain that no other woman present could shine as brightly. Sometimes, this required draconian coercive measures. During the winter of 1747, the empress decreed that all of her ladies-in-waiting must shave their heads and wear black wigs until their hair grew in again. The women wept but obeyed. Catherine assumed that her own turn would come, but to her surprise, she was spared: Elizabeth explained that Catherine's hair was just growing back after an illness. Soon, the reason for the general pruning became known: after a previous festive occasion, Elizabeth and her maids had been unable to brush a heavy powder out of her hair, which became gray, coagulated, and gummy. The only remedy was to have her head shaved. And because she refused to be the only bald woman at court, bushels of hair were cropped.

What do you think of her now? I have seen tender moments too.

I have read 12% of the book. I am somewhere in chapter 11. I have noted that several say that although they enjoy the book, they put it aside and read other lighter books occasionally. I take the opposite approach. I came to a point where the future husband of Sophia, who will later come to be called Catherine, died..... What! I obviously had something confused. The truth is that if you bother to try and understand the different family members and how they are all related, you do need to pay attention. If I had chosen to put the book aside for a while, I would have had to start over from the beginning. My head leaks. Instead I backtracked to the beginning of the chapter and determined that I would sit and pay close attention for at least one hour. No breaks, nothing, just reading. And this did the trick. That was a different Peter, who died! I would not recommend reading this book on a noisy metro, or in a noisy room while the kids are looking at TV. No,

read it when you can pay attention, at least in those parts where the complicated family relations are discussed. You run into such sections and then you do need to pay attention. Other sections are not at all as difficult.

Or maybe you don't have to pay close attention. What I most enjoy in this book so far is the way the author describes the people in a nuanced manner. Take Empress Elizabeth. She was the daughter of Peter the Great. She did not seek power. She was vivacious and fun loving and had several affairs. But no kids. However there comes a point where either the regent Anna Leopoldovna is going to stick her in a nunnery or she had to fight for the reign. She had no intention of sitting in a nunnery. When she fights to become Empress you are rooting for her. As all people, she had kind, wonderful characteristics and others qualities less admirable. You see all the different sides of her personality. It is the author's ability to show us who the characters really are that I most enjoy. So maybe you can just forget the difficult sections that are hard to follow. That is another approach.

You will come to understand Elizabeth and Sophia and her future husband Grand Duke Peter Ulrich. It is important to know of what happened to them in their childhood. They both had very difficult family situations. Wait till you hear of how Sophia's mother, Johanna, treats her daughter. When they leave on a secret trip, in the winter to travel to St. Petersburg absolutely no clothes are bought for Sophia. Johanna spent the money on clothes for herself! Sophia was off to meet her future betrothed with the fewest of garments imaginable. This is just one indication of the horrible mother/ daughter relationship. And Peter, put under the supervision of Brümmer. You will be shocked. Peter is not particularly handsome or stable, but you will understand why. He was practically starved to death as punishment for slight misdemeanors. Both Sophia and Peter are starving for kindness. I will not say more, but their lives are very interesting. I have only come to the point where they are betrothed. Peter is still sexually immature, so marriage must be delayed. But the clock is ticking for Elizabeth. There are scenes that will make you laugh - men dressed as women and women as men and dancers falling over each other! All so that Elizabeth can display her shapely legs. Well, read the book and you will understand.

So I like the book. Either you see that you are left in peace to understand the sections that are a bit complicated, or you don't worry too much and just enjoy that which is easily engaging. Your choice depends on your own personality. But don't skip the book! So far, I think it is fascinating.

BEFORE READING: This WILL be available in Kindle format on November 8, 2011!!!!!! YAY! Does fussing help? I have also requested his Peter the Great book on Kindle.....

Yelda Basar Moers says

I just finished this biography of Catherine the Great and I have to say it was riveting-- a real page turner. I didn't want it to end-- even after 570 pages of it!!! The author won a Pulitzer Prize for his biography of Peter the Great (the famed European style reformer who made Russia a great power). His writing is so engaging that I couldn't put this book down!

Catherine's story is remarkable: She was an obscure German princess (of a tiny principality!) who rose to become the Empress of Russia (no Emperor by the way, her husband ruled for six months and then was dead, the crown was all hers!). It is not power, cruelty or despotism that got her to the throne, but kindness, endurance, patience, tolerance and a soft-spoken, calm disposition. And of course a healthy dose of ambition. She wanted to rule. Though she had no experience whatsoever ruling a government or sovereign she was

always eager to learn and taught herself. She avoided war, sought peace with foreign powers, opposed serfdom and eliminated church power whereby the church became a state institution. A huge portion of the income of Russia went to her personal estate but she turned it all over to the state saying that everything that is hers belonged to the people. She looked for solutions, systems; she was a humanist. Russia during her regime flourished and progressed as England did during Queen Elizabeth's Golden Age two centuries before. Catherine was a great patron of the arts and built parks, buildings, schools.

What I most want to share is that Catherine was a voracious and avid reader who loved to learn-- Diderot and Voltaire were among her favorites and friends, and I believe it was this quality and her curiosity and belief in progress that enabled her to have such an Enlightened monarchy and Western style regime in Orthodox Russia. She corresponded often with Voltaire and applied his principles of justice and tolerance to her reign as an "Enlightened monarch." She had a close relationship with all the Enlightened thinkers and intellectuals of Europe. She left a legacy that allowed the work of future writers such as Tolstoy whose magnum opus I just recently read (War and Peace)!

She was not a Romanov by birth and had no connection to the throne by blood. She also was a Lutheran but converted to the Orthodox faith. That's why it's remarkable that on her own merits she became Empress of all of Mother Russia. The people loved her! She ruled alone for over 30 years.

Her story is truly inspiring and it is always so empowering to read about such powerful and influential women in history! I highly, highly recommend this book!!! It is a great achievement and kudos to the author-- Robert K. Massie! I think my brain actually grew from reading it!

I'm also reading The Romanovs, touted as an excellent historical book about the dynasty that ruled Russia for 300 years until the Bolshevik Revolution! Both titles have become New York Times Bestsellers! You cannot go wrong with either!
